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ABSTRACT

One-to-one tutoring programs, such as peer and cross-age tutoring, can result in emotional and learning benefits for the tutor and the tutee. Peer tutoring involves two students of the same age. In cross-age tutoring, the tutor is older than the tutee. The Willamette High School Peer Tutoring Program in Eugene, Oregon; the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program in San Antonio, Texas; and the Companion Reading Program (Salt Lake City, Utah) are examples of peer and cross-age tutoring programs. Advantages of these programs are that tutors are better than adults in relating to their tutees on a cognitive, emotional, and social level. Also, cross-age tutoring offers the tutor the higher status of being older but still being close in age. Tutors can benefit from cross-age and peer tutoring because it allows them to review material and to improve thinking and communication skills. For a program to succeed, tutors should be trained and should understand the material tutees will be learning. Problems in cross-age tutoring can include tutees' resisting the program and conflicts with scheduling. (Contains nine references.) (JPT)

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Peer and Cross-Age Tutoring

by Joan Gaustad

One-to-one tutoring has long been recognized as superior to group instruction, especially for students with special needs. Tutoring can adapt instruction to the learner's pace, learning style, and level of understanding. Feedback and correction are immediate. Basic misunderstandings can be quickly identified and corrected, practice provided, and more difficult material introduced as soon as the student is ready.

Tutoring has emotional as well as cognitive benefits. Students can achieve at their own pace without being compared with faster learners. The extra attention and emotional support may help fill important psychological needs for children from troubled or single-parent families.

Research has demonstrated that with proper training, students can successfully tutor other students. Strikingly, student tutors often benefit as much or more than their tutees (Gaustad 1992).

What Are Peer and Cross-Age Tutoring?

Peer tutoring occurs when tutor and tutee are the same age. In *cross-age tutoring*, the tutor is older than the tutee. However, sometimes the term peer tutoring is used to include both types.

Successful programs take many forms. Three programs serve to illustrate the wide range of configurations possible.

The *Willamette High School Peer Tutoring Program* seeks to improve the academic performance of at-risk ninth graders. This program in Eugene, Oregon, selects academically strong students as tutors and gives them academic credit for training classes and tutoring. Tutors "sit in" on their tutees' classes and assist them during ongoing class activities (Gaustad).

The *Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program* (VYP), developed by the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) in San Antonio, Texas, recruits low-achieving Hispanic middle school students to tutor at-risk Hispanic elementary students. Tutors, who are the program's primary focus, are paid as well as given academic credit. The program seeks to prevent tutors from dropping out, improve their academic skills and attitudes toward self and school, and decrease truancy and disciplinary referrals by making them valued members of the school community (Cardenas and others 1991).

The *Companion Reading Program* was developed by Brigham Young University Professor Grant Harrison for levels K-3 and higher. Tutoring is one of several integrated instructional components. All students in a class take turns acting as tutor and tutee during daily exercises. Students thus reap the benefits of both roles (Metra 1992).

What Makes Peer and Cross-Age Tutoring Effective?

Children have certain advantages over adults in teaching peers. They may more easily understand tutees' problems because they are cognitively closer. Allen and Feldman found that third and sixth graders were more accurate than experienced teachers in determining from nonverbal behavior whether agemates understood lessons (cited in Allen 1976). The fact that their "cognitive framework" is similar may also help peer tutors present subject matter in terms their tutees understand (Cohen 1986).

Peer tutors can effectively model study skills such as concentrating on the material, organizing work habits, and asking questions. Cohen notes that similarity between model and learner increases the influence of modeling. An at-risk child may more easily identify with a student relatively close in age, particularly one of the same ethnic or social background, than with an adult. Higher status also promotes the effect of modeling. Cross-age tutoring takes advantage of the higher status inherent in the age difference while still retaining considerable similarity.

Tutors who have struggled academically may be more patient and understanding than those who haven't (Lippitt 1976). The IDRA's Josie Supik believes empathy contributes greatly to low-achievers' effectiveness as cross-age tutors. Supik said VYP tutors often "pick up on things teachers weren't able to" because they had experienced similar problems a few years earlier (Gaustad).

Peer and cross-age tutoring often improve the overall school atmosphere. Teachers and parents in Faribault, Minnesota, found Companion Reading reduced competition and created a more supportive classroom environment. "The children seemed much more accepting of their peers and classmates and I've heard less derogatory remarks about classmates," wrote one parent (Stofferahn 1988).

How Do Student Tutors Benefit from Tutoring?

Tutors benefit academically from the time spent reviewing and practicing material with their tutees. In programs like the Valued Youth Program, whose training classes

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encourage critical and higher-order thinking skills (IDRA 1991), tutors may also experience higher cognitive gains. Organizing material to teach "facilitates long-term retention, as well as aiding in the formation of a more comprehensive and integrated understanding" (Cohen). Tutoring also provides opportunities to practice and improve communication skills and work habits.

Tutors' self-esteem rises as they see their tutees improve. Knowing they are making a meaningful contribution is a powerful experience. Supik reported that many VYP tutors stop skipping classes and behaving disruptively after they realize they are role models for their tutees (Gaustad).

What Problems Are Commonly Encountered?

Simply putting two students together won't result in successful tutoring. Untrained tutors—whether adults or students—may resort to threats of punishment and scornful put-downs. Tutors need training to master effective tutorial and communication skills.

Another potential problem is that student tutors may not completely understand the material to be taught. Cohen suggests assessing potential tutors' comprehension before assigning them to tutor. However, a tutor need not be an excellent student, especially in the case of cross-age tutoring. "A sixth grader operating at a fourth grade level can be an excellent helper of a second grader who is also operating below grade level," Lippitt points out.

One drawback of peer tutoring is that tutees, often labeled as less capable than tutors, tend to resist being tutored by agemates. School Counselor Cassie Malecha reports that some students resisted being tutored when the Willamette High School program began. "But when they realized it was really beneficial, students started asking for it: 'She's helping him, why can't she help me?'" Tutoring eventually became a normal, accepted part of school life (Gaustad). The Companion Reading Program avoids status problem by having classmates take turns tutoring and being tutored.

Scheduling is a challenge with cross-age tutoring because it requires coordinating the schedules of two sets of students. Offering tutoring as a credit class gives tutors a predictable block of time. However, one period may not provide enough time if tutors and tutees attend schools some distance apart. Harrison found many schools were unwilling to cope with the logistical problems of cross-age tutoring, despite its effectiveness. He designed the self-contained Companion Reading Program in response to this problem (Gaustad).

What Elements Are Necessary for a Successful Program?

The design of a tutoring program is dictated by its objectives, including age group targeted and subject area, and by the availability of human, physical, and financial resources.

Establishing specific, measurable objectives permits assessment of individual progress and evaluation of the program's success as a whole. Frequent assessment of student progress gives program staff feedback on the effectiveness of lessons and encourages both tutor and tutee (Lippitt).

Procedures must be established for selecting and matching tutors and tutees. Examples of tutee selection criteria include test scores, Chapter 1 eligibility, and teacher judgment. Tutors may be screened for desired attitudes or levels of academic competence. The Valued Youth Program, which recruits students who meet state at-risk criteria, accepts those with records of minor disciplinary problems but draws the line at criminal behavior.

Tutors may be given basic training to accompany carefully structured materials, as in the Companion Reading Program, or extensive training that enables them to make more independent decisions. Extensive training is desirable when tutor progress is the main objective.

Tutors need ongoing supervision and support. Younger tutors will require more structure and closer supervision. In periodic group meetings, older tutors gain psychological support by talking out frustrations and sharing success stories. Tutors can learn from each other's experiences as well as from staff suggestions for handling problems.

Support by teachers and administrators is essential for a tutoring program to succeed in the long run. Lippitt lists typical problems and concerns and recommends openly discussing them beforehand. Parents and the community should also be informed. Teachers who understand and believe in a program's potential to help their children will generally be firm supporters.

Decades of research have established that well-planned peer tutoring programs can improve student achievement and self-esteem as well as overall school climate. The wide variety of programs available should enable every interested school district to find a format that suits its needs.

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